Grant expands colon test

■ **Federal funds allow Stony Brook to offer free precancer exams to low-income and underinsured patients**

BY CURTIS L. TAYLOR
STAFF WRITER

PHOTO BY PATRICK OEHLER

Dr. Dorothy Lane, far left, and Dr. Mary Cavanagh, far right, who both work with the Suffolk County Preventive Endoscopy project, with patients Merrily Sanfino and Mary-Jane Chudomel

For years Merrily Sanfino's daughter urged her to have a colorectal examination because of the family's history of bowel cancer. But the $5,000 procedure remained a medical option too expensive for the self-employed Sanfino, who has no health insurance.

"My daughter was bugging me to have the procedure but . . . if you don't have a problem, then you don't do the screening," said Sanfino, 63, of East Hampton.

But under a new federally funded program at Stony Brook University Hospital, Sanfino was able to allay her daughter's fears. She recently received a free colonoscopy.

"I feel great, everything went well," said Sanfino, one of the first Long Islanders to take advantage of the Suffolk County Preventive Endoscopy program called SCOPE, a Stony Brook University project funded by a $600,000 cooperative agreement from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to do colorectal screening.

Colorectal cancer affects the large intestine and the rectum and is the second-leading cause of all cancer deaths in the country. The American Cancer Society estimates that nearly 150,000 Americans were diagnosed with colorectal cancer this year and nearly 56,000 will die from the disease.

On Long Island, it killed 603 people from 1999 to 2003, according to State Health Department statistics. Local health officials said most of deaths could have been prevented with early detection and treatment.

Nine out of 10 people who get colon cancer are 50 or older, but less than half of all Americans in the same age group have had a recent screening test, health officials said. The removal of precancerous polyps during a colonoscopy can prevent bowel cancer from starting.

Dr. Dorothy Lane, SCOPE project director, said the demonstration project — one of five in the country — targets the low-income and underinsured.

"Access to care is important," Lane, a professor of preventive medicine, said. "Our goals are to increase colorectal cancer screening among underinsured populations throughout Suffolk and prevent colorectal cancer or detect it at an early stage when it is most treatable."

"All New Yorkers over 50 should get this essential test," Dr. Lynn Silver, assistant commissioner for chronic disease prevention, said.

Dr. Laura Seeff, CDC program head, said similar programs have been established elsewhere, using different screening tests, including the colonoscopy and fecal occult blood testing, or FOBT.

"We are trying to determine how best to increase colorectal cancer screening at the community level," Seeff said.

Dr. Mary Cavanagh, the SCOPE public health clinician, said colonoscopy is an outpatient procedure. During the test, a doctor examines the lining of the large intestine with a colonoscope, a flexible instrument that can take biopsies and remove polyps, she said.

The program has received more than 120 referrals, with 28 scheduled colonoscopies since early May, according to a hospital spokesman. The hospital has also distributed a bilingual educational video about colorectal cancer at area health clinics as part of the grant.

Mary-Jane Chudomel, 63, of Miller Place said polyps were removed from her colon during the procedure at Stony Brook.

"I figured it was important to get tested because both my parents died from bowel cancer," Chudomel said. "It is wonderful. Everyone should have it done. It turned out to be a blessing."

Loonlike 'missing link' found in China

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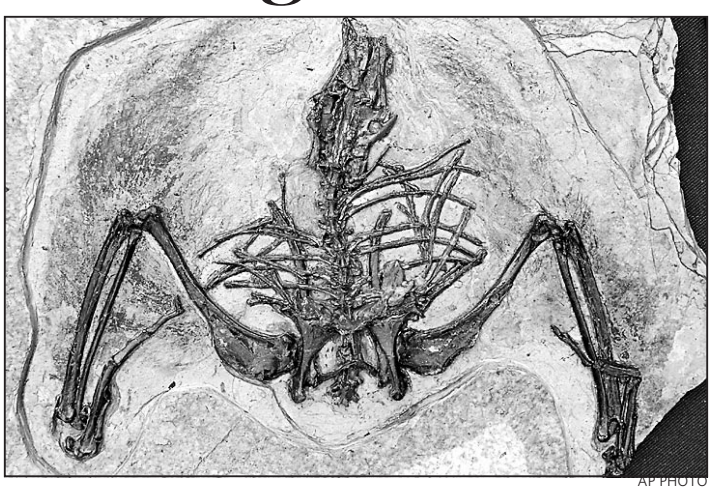

AP PHOTO

Researchers say this fossil of *Gansus yumenensis*, found in northwest China, fills a gap in the evolution of modern birds.

Separating layers of sediment from an ancient lake was like turning the pages of a book to glimpse life in the time of dinosaurs, an international team of scientists said yesterday.

"A world lost for more than 100 million years was being revealed to us," said Hai-lu You of the Chinese Academy of Geological Sciences.

What they found is being called the missing link in the evolution of birds, a loonlike creature that lived in northwest China and is the earliest example of modern birds.

Before their discovery, reported in today's issue of the journal Science, the only evidence for this creature — *Gansus yumenensis* — was a single, partial leg discovered in the 1980s. Now researchers have dozens of nearly complete fossils of Gansus, said Matt Lamanna of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh.

"Most of the ancestors of birds from the age of dinosaurs are members of groups that died out and left no modern descendants. But Gansus led to modern birds, so it's a link between primitive birds and those we see today," he said.

Previously there was a gap between ancient and modern species of birds, and "Gansus fits perfectly into this gap," added Jerald D. Harris of Dixie State College in Utah.

It was about the size of a modern pigeon, but similar to loons or diving ducks, the researchers said. One of the fossils even has skin preserved between the toes, showing that it had webbed feet.

"Gansus is the oldest example of the nearly modern birds that branched off of the trunk of the family tree that began with the famous proto-bird *Archaeopteryx*," said Peter Dodson of the University of Pennsylvania.

The remains were dated to about 110 million years ago, making them the oldest for the group *Ornithurae,* which includes all modern birds and their closest extinct relatives. The fact that Gansus was aquatic indicates that modern birds may have evolved from animals that originated in aquatic environments.

Briefing

Wanted on LI: Southern leopard frog

Last year's hunt for the Southern leopard frog on Long Island yielded a slew of tantalizing clues but no ironclad proof that the once-plentiful amphibian has retained even a toehold in its former domain.

Thanks to a grant from the Long Island Community Foundation, herpetologist Jeremy Feinberg is at it again this year, scouring promising habitats in the hopes of spying the elusive spotted frog.

Common in central New Jersey and further south, the wetland-loving creature hasn't been documented on Long Island since the early '90s though unconfirmed sightings persist.

Commonly confused with pickerel frogs and ranging in hue from emerald to bronze, Southern leopard frogs are distinguished by the white dot in the center of each tympanum, or the auditory organ behind each eye.

Southern leopard frogs also are famed for their distinctive chucklelike calls, though the calling window has all but passed for the year.

Feinberg, a graduate student in ecology and evolution at Rutgers University, hopes to instead rely on visual identification in his quest, aided by the Foundation for Ecological Research in the Northeast.

To report a sighting, e-mail jfeinberg@bnl.gov or call 631-344-2037.

— BRYN NELSON

The Southern leopard frog is plentiful in the pinelands of New Jersey (where the specimen below resides). but it has virtually vanished from Long Island. Or so researchers surmise.

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER CAMACHO